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CULTURE IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM.

BY- SEELYE, H. NED

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THE NEED IN LANGUAGE STUDY FOR CULTURAL CONTENT, IN THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL SENSE (I.E., FOR CULTURAL REFERENTS OF LINGUISTIC UNITS), HAS GROWN WITH THE INCREASED EMPHASIS ON ORAL PROFICIENCY AND THE ABILITY TO FUNCTION IN THE TARGET LANGUAGE. INCORPORATING CULTURE INTO THE LANGUAGE PROGRAM CAN BE ACCOMPLISHED ON THE SECONDARY LEVEL BY HAVING THE SOCIAL STUDIES CLASS WORK CLOSELY WITH THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE DEPARTMENT, AND ON THE COLLEGE LEVEL BY INTERDISCIPLINARY OFFERINGS. HOPEFULLY, MORE COLLEGES WILL ENCOURAGE STUDY ABROAD, AND MORE EXCHANGE PROGRAMS WILL BE IMPLEMENTED TO PROVIDE MORE INDIVIDUALS WITH THE EXPERIENCE OF FUNCTIONING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN THE "ILLINOIS JOURNAL OF EDUCATION," VOLUME 59, NUMBER 3, MARCH 1968, PAGES 22-26. (AF)

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CULTURE IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

H. NED SEELYE, *Instructor,* Department Foreign Languages
Northern Illinois University, DeKalb

If a student (or teacher) is unaware of the cultural referent of a linguistic unit he does not know the meaning of that unit—irrespective of whether he is able to voice it and/or translate it. Sometimes this ignorance has far-reaching consequences. Often, the student is lead in classroom drill to glib fluency in simple questions such as "Where do you work?" and "Are you married?", which will offend the listener in many situations. It does not suffice to teach a student to say a given phrase. He must be taught the circumstances in which the phrase can be employed — and those instances where it should be definitely avoided. Prompted by curiosity, I recently asked a second-year Spanish class to translate "How is your mother?" My best student answered —using one of the worst vituperative epithets available in the Spanish of most Latin American countries—"*¿Cómo está tu madre?*" In this case, *mamá* should definitely have been substituted for the offensive *madre.*

The cultural inadequacy of much language training is not confined to the heavy-footed blunders of the type just cited. Take the innocuous sentence, "My little brother goes to school." What kind of school? Public? Private? Co-ed? Half-day? Full-day? Does he wear a uniform? With a little bit of context such as the social class of the family and place of residence, most of this information is understood by the culturally initiated. Just what are the linguistic and extralinguistic cues to social class in Latin America or France? Many of the awkward mistakes of Americans abroad could be avoided if their language classes had included the cultural extensions of linguistic units as a part of the course content. If a student does not realize the nature of these cultural referents, how much of the foreign language can he be said to know?

Since the cultural aspect of language instruction is customarily tied to the linguistic aims of the course, it will be profitable to examine the kind of language that is being taught in the classroom before examining the role of culture in foreign language study. Formerly, much of the teaching profession viewed the foreign language as a passive instrument through which students were taught to jump in order to result "educated." Values such as "a better understanding of English grammar" and "a knowledge of the masterpieces of Western heritage" were commonly espoused to guide the besieged teacher through the often bewildering complex of a foreign language scarcely mastered by the teacher himself. Language was not so much a skill to be learned and used as it was a means to discipline the educated gentleman (or, as the situation developed, the educated gentle*woman*) to the glory of the Western World. Only the lunatic fringe thought to teach a non-Western language such as Chinese—much less a language lacking a written literature such as Swahili. In this context of academic discipline and chauvinistic traditions, it was only logical that "culture" be regarded as those prod-

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ucts of esthetic value which, when viewed as a whole, comprised the magnificent tapestry of what, in our circles, was considered the planet's most highly developed civilization. Culture, in the grammar-translation school of the Age, meant the post-Renaissance production of Europe's precious few artisans and intelligentsia. It was not until the primary goal of language instruction changed from this elitist and sheltered stance that the cultural content to be included in the foreign language course was able to make a basic expansion.

Anthropologists began discovering that "unknown," "primitive" languages were every bit as complex and hard to learn as was French or German. They began discovering (once they learned the language) an oral literature rich in metaphor and poetry. Social scientists began using the terms "society" and "culture" interchangeably. When pressed by an earnest language teacher for an example of "culture," the iconoclastic anthropologist might refer to the particular set of conventions regulating the incest taboo, or the manner in which the "natives" buried their dead, or indeed, the way in which they prepared soup from rotting fish. Language teachers, while intrigued, were not to be perverted from the *straight* and *narrow*.

Then came the World War II. We were not only materially unprepared for Pearl Harbor, we were *linguistically* unprepared. Who in the secure bastions of university language departments spoke Japanese or Tagalog or any of the scores of languages which all of a sudden were of strategic importance? Certainly not the language teachers! They were too busy establishing a hierarchy of prestige based on the relative "worth" of the literature of the country whose language they read. How were soldiers to learn a language lacking a written grammar (or, as some language teachers proclaimed, a language with no grammar)? The government was forced to ask anthropologists to teach the "exotic" languages since the social scientists were the only ones to be found who spoke them. Fortunately but not surprisingly, one section of anthropology devoted its efforts to a study of the nature of language in general—linguistics. The results of this language instruction for the United States Army were to prove catastrophic to the grammar translationists.

It was immediately observed that the anthropological linguists did a better job of preparing students to speak a foreign language than did the traditional language teachers. This was hardly surprising given the life or death motivation of the students and the fact that the traditional teachers were not too concerned with teaching oral fluency in the foreign language. It was largely due to the tremendous prestige in which the "new wave" of language teachers suddenly found themselves immersed—and the intransigence of much of the teaching profession—that encouraged them to wax militaristic against the traditionalists. The decade of the fifties stands as a battered monument to the gains of the structural linguists at the expense of the "Latin" grammarians. Just what it was that everyone was fighting for, was often obsecured by the polemics. National conventions during this period were especially fun to watch. Red-faced traditionalists would rise to put in their place the *cockier* structuralists. The lay public began to side with those who prophesied miracles of new-found fluency —the structuralists. Teachers who had previously derived their prestige from the esoteric realm of literature now found their credentials under question. Prestige began flowing to those teachers who could actually converse with a native speaker of the foreign language. The Modern Language Association, which had begun to modernize by appointing a committee to work on suggestions to guide textbooks authors, finally marketed its own text, *Modern Spanish* (1960). Now, eight years later, it is considered quaintly archaic

in most circles to teach a grammar-translation course.

When the aim of language instruction was to acquaint the student with the esthetic documents of Western literary history, it followed that the cultural content of the course would focus on other esthetic documents, such as music and the plastic arts. Now that the primary aim of most language courses is to improve a student's oral fluency so that he is able to communicate in the foreign language, the traditional role of culture is wholly inadequate. As language has become viewed as a functional tool, so may culture be regarded as a complementary tool to aid the student in functioning in a foreign society. What are the cultural components which enhance one's capability of functioning in a second culture?

Every language has devices—intonation patterns, function words, a sound system—which are indispensable elements of the language but which lack meaning in and of themselves. Even words do not, in isolation, convey meaning. It is only within a larger context that individual words mean anything. The word "get," for example, has several hundred potential meanings; it is only in context that a particular meaning is communicated. What provides this meaningful context? Often it is the nonlinguistic referent which enables us to communicate. For instance, last year several Spanish teachers visited me in Guatemala, where I had been teaching for several years. The maid asked them if they would like something to drink and they requested *agua* (water). About fifteen minutes later the maid returned with Coca Colas. In Guatemala, *agua* commonly refers to soft drinks. To get H_2O, *agua pura* should have been requested. But once the language barrier has been hurtled and a glass of water has been obtained, what does one do with it? Can it be drunk? For all some students know, camel blood may be the local thirst-quenching beverage.

An interesting example of misunderstanding prompted by ignorance of the cultural referent of a linguistic unit was afforded by an advanced undergraduate class of Latin American literature which I taught some years ago. In preparation for the course, a number of paperbacks were ordered from Mexico to be sold by the college bookstore to the students. After the titles were announced in class, the students dutifully trekked to the bookstore, made the required purchases, then retired to their dormitories. Within an hour, three-fourths of the class had attempted to return the paperbacks to the bookstore because the books were "defective"—the pages had not been cut. Although these Spanish majors had been using the word *libro* for at least five years, they were not able to distinguish a defective book from a "normal" one. What would they have understood from the commoplace *"Me senté con un libro y un cuchillo"* ("I sat down with a book and a knife")?

Information concerning the cultural referents of linguistic units can be provided the student on various levels of instruction. Culture—in the anthropological sense of the way of life of a people—should comprise the lion's share of the content of at least one-third of the advanced language courses (literature and linguistics occupying much of the other portions). Materials prepared by social scientists and newspaper reporters are often superior to anthologies prepared by literary scholars for use in the foreign language classroom. On the advanced language level, the problem is largely one of selecting the appropriate "supplementary" materials to teach culture. On the beginning level, however, the problem is quite different.

Modern language courses generally exclude the extended use of English as a medium of communication. Unfortunately, the neophyte student is hardly up to involved conversations or readings in the

target language. This situation suggests at least two means for the inclusion of cultural content within the beginning course: outside readings in English (presumably to be tested in English during the language class), and the limited exposition of the cultural referents of common linguistic units. Where cultural readings in English can more economically be employed by the primary or secondary teacher of social studies, then the language teacher can, to the extent the social studies teacher covers the area, abdicate the teaching of certain phases of culture. Care should be taken, however, to see that the cultural content is geared to the problem of *functioning* within the target culture. A review of physical geography, the history and heroes, and fine arts tradition of a country does not necessarily prepare a student to function in a country. Ideally, the social studies class would work closely with the department of foreign languages. On the college level, interdisciplinary offerings tender promising approaches to this problem.

It is in the area of cultural referents to linguistic units, however, that the language teacher can contribute his unique experience and insight to a better understanding of the target culture. It is this level of culture that is most applicable to the elementary stages of audiolingual instruction. The words (and phrases) of intrinsic interest for students (love, drunk, fight) or of greatest frequency (book, dog, walk) offer the raw material for cultural instruction. Pictures, tactile examples where practical, or simple statements in the target language pointing up a contrastive feature of the word can serve to acquaint the student with the realities of the target culture. The nonlinguistic gestures which often accompany these words should be taught. The hand signals indicating "no," "come here," and "good-by" immediately come to mind in this context.

Some teachers may object to so much emphasis on the "functional" requisite of the kind of culture to be included in a foreign language classroom. Teaching a student to function culturally is all right, they might say, as long as you are preparing the student to go abroad, but how many students do eventually travel or live abroad? We might turn the question around and ask; How much of the language (not culture) do students and teachers who have never resided abroad learn? John B. Carroll, in a recent article in *Foreign Language Annals* ("Foreign Language Proficiency Levels Attained by Language Majors Near Graduation from College", *FLA 1* [2], December, 1967, pp. 131-151) says this:

> "Time spent abroad is clearly one of the most potent variables we have found, and this is not surprising, for reasons that need not be belabored. Certainly our results provide a strong justification for a 'year abroad' as one of the experiences to be recommended for the language majors. Even a tour abroad, or a summer school course abroad, is useful, apparently, in improving the student's skill. The obverse of this finding may be rather humbling for the foreign language teaching profession; those who do *not* go abroad do not seem to be able to get very far in their foreign language study, on the average, despite the ministrations of foreign language teachers, language laboratories, audiolingual methods, and the rest." (p. 137, italics removed)

When one reflects on the random helter-skelter nature of the contact with language and culture that a tour abroad presents the peripatetic student, one may be prompted to question the severe rigidity of most language classes today. Perhaps it is time to consider preparing the student for what will give him a lifetime commitment to the target language and culture — residence abroad. Hopefully, more and more colleges will follow the

forward-looking example of schools such as Kalamazoo College which *require* the student (nonlanguage majors included) to live abroad. Exchange programs on the secondary level should be supported. Certainly if we want the student to learn the target language, he must go abroad. Language instruction can be an extremely valuable and rewarding means of preparing the student for this experience; of functioning in a foreign culture.

If it is still too precipitative to teach ability to function—culturally and linguistically—then perhaps we can find comfort in deploring the "stupidity" of most language students and in doting over the few students— mostly female—with demonstrated language aptitude. We can teach them grammatical rules, art history, and literature.

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People have prejudices against a nation in which they have no acquaintance.

—P. Hamerton

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